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Being Patient Zero on Campus

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Paul T. Anderson is a senior from Newnan, Georgia. He is graduating in May with his BA in Social Sciences and Teacher's License and a minor in Bible and Ministry. While at Harding, he has served as the Vice President of the Eta Phi chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, the President of the Arkansas Eta chapter of Alpha Chi, the Spiritual Life Coordinator of Chi Sigma Alpha men's social club, and is active as a Bible class teacher at the Foothills church of Christ. Following graduation, he will be working towards achieving his Masters of Education in Reading at Harding, with the long-term goal of teaching high school history.

COVID JOURNAL: BEING PATIENT ZERO ON CAMPUS

By Paul T. Anderson

It was the morning of September 6th, and I got up to get ready to go teach my Sunday School class. I rolled out of bed that morning as usual, and noticed that I felt a little off. When I checked my temperature, it was high enough to give me pause, so I called one of the elders and told them I would not be in that morning. That's how it began. Actually, that's not completely true. By the time I woke up that morning, four important things had already occurred.

First, on September 4th, Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson gave his COVID update from Searcy, and in it, praised Harding University for having such a low number of cases. In fact, at the time, no on-campus student had a declared, active case of the novel coronavirus. Secondly, on September 5th, around noon, I noticed that I had a light cough. I gave this almost no thought; I suffer from chronic allergies, and having a cough periodically is just part of life. Surely this was not the kind of cough that signals having COVID. Because I did not think twice about it, I went to a cookout that evening, the third important thing. We were outside, wearing masks, and we had waited the two weeks into the semester. There were no cases on campus, so we felt pretty safe. Our sense of security was unfortunately misplaced, because the fourth important thing was that at some point in the previous week, I had contracted COVID-19.

That Sunday, as I monitored my fever, it just continued to grow, until that afternoon I had cleared the 100.4° threshold to fill out the Google Form to get tested. Since it was Sunday, though, I did not get the call to get tested until Monday morning, which unfortunately happened to be Labor Day, so my test was not sent off until Tuesday morning. At this point, my roommate and suite mates and I were all already self-quarantining and had been for several days. Everything seemed to drag by at a snail's pace.

That changed when the phone call came. I got the news that I was indeed positive for COVID. I immediately called the dorm mom, and then my parents. My next call came from Dean Thomas, who walked me through the procedure and my next steps. I had to gather my clothes, laptop, and school materials for the next week, and anything else I might need. I got one trip across the front lawn to move into Kendall Hall,

where I was assigned a bare room at the end of the third floor. Perhaps even worse, I had to immediately list off the names of all of my close contacts. I knew that it was not my fault, but even still, I felt an almost overwhelming sense of guilt. Because of me, some twenty of my friends would end up locked up for two weeks or more. To top it all off, I would ruin the spotless track record Harding had set.

I could try to recount my time day by day, but I will not do that here. First, the days truly have blurred together, and did even as they were passing. Let me instead touch on some of the lows and the highs. I dealt with most of the common symptoms: the cough, the exhaustion, the aches, the fever. At first, I didn't notice the shortness of breath, until I was singing along on Sunday during worship on Zoom with many of my friends. My taste and smell did not disappear completely, although they were muted. Of course, this may have been a blessing in disguise. The meals that were delivered daily were not exactly fine dining. I missed so many of the comforts of my own room; I particularly missed the three-inch mattress topper on my bed at night. The worst I ever physically felt was the night before my fever broke. I found myself on the uneven tile of the bathroom floor in front of the toilet, trying not to throw up, and praying fervently. The worst part, make no mistake, was nothing physical at all. It was the isolation.

I am an intensely social person. I would rather spend every last minute in the company of my friends than on my own. To make matters worse, a dear friend of mine passed away while I was in isolation, so I had to mourn on my own. I would sit at the window looking down at the small length of sidewalk along the Front Lawn that I could see, hoping someone would look up and notice me. It was rare.

With all of that said, I was incredibly blessed during my time in isolation. Friends, church family, and the queens of Chi Sigs brought me meals and snacks. The History and Political Science department staff went so far as to ask my friends who had already graduated what kinds of things I would like most, and when they delivered it, it took an entire laundry basket to hold it all. My friends who were quarantined got on Zoom calls and played Scattergories and Quiplash. Dean Neal personally delivered a minifridge and a microwave so that I could save leftovers and actually eat when I was hungry. Most touching of all was getting phone calls, emails, texts, and Facebook messages from friends, family

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members, and brothers and sisters in Christ from all over the country, telling me they loved me and were praying for me.

The night that I was released was a special night; I carried my things back to the dorm, and then went to sit on the Front Lawn and just enjoy the fresh air. I was interviewed by *The Bison* to help prepare those who would go through similar experiences, and I have given several devotional messages from some of the things I learned while dealing with COVID. I feel like I understand so many of the Biblical figures better now: the leper, the prisoner, the outcast. I had to deal with guilt; even though no one that we know of contracted COVID from me, I still had to forgive myself for putting them through a very uncomfortable experience. I had to deal with the stigma of being “Patient Zero.” I am thankful to those who helped me through it and the good that came from it, but I certainly hope that I never have to repeat such an experience. As the clouds appear to be lifting as we near what is hopefully the far side of this pandemic, I hope that you never have to either. If you do, though, remember that you are not the first, and whatever happens, you are not alone.